

Fall Records Before The Fall

by PETER STONE BROWN

For his new album, *Roll With The Punches* (Exile/Caroline), Van Morrison decided to reach back to his first musical love, the blues. Working with a stripped down band with limited use of horns, except for a couple of sax solos by Morrison himself, and only occasional background singers, Morrison combines covers with originals. The title song opens the set complete with a standard Muddy Waters/Willie Dixon riff, getting the closest he's come to a true Chicago blues sound, singing like he means it, and sounding like the kid who shouted out the blues with Them 50 years later.

He then slips into a typical Morrison soul ballad, "Transformation," which as close as he gets to mystic revelation on this set, with Jeff Beck (who appears on five tracks) providing sweet guitar. Also appearing on various tracks are other singers from the UK who started out playing blues, Chris Farlowe, Paul Jones, and Georgie Fame.

Farlowe is particularly engaging on "I Can Tell" (first recorded by Bo Diddley and also by John Hammond), but where they truly have a great time is on the medley of "Stormy Monday/Lonely Avenue" with an incendiary solo from Beck, and a truly funky harp solo from Van.

Then the album slips into jazz territory with "Goin' To Chicago" written by Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing, a duet with Georgie Fame. The instrumentation is sparse with Morrison on guitar and harp, and Fame on organ, backed by string bass and drums.

On just about every album Morrison's made for the past 30 years, there's always one song where he's either bitching about the music business or being a celebrity. "Fame," an original bluesy duet with Paul Jones who also contributes harp fills that role here, but Morrison's approach here or perhaps it's the way they're singing it is laced with quite a bit of humor.

"Too Much Trouble" revisits the jazz feel of "Moondance," but on a new version of Sam Cooke's "Bring It On Home To Me," with a couple of added lyrics, and a couple of soaring guitar solos from Beck, Morrison turns it into a gospel romp. Van delves even further into gospel on Sister Rosetta Tharpe's "How Far From God," Dominated by Stuart McLlroy's piano, midway through Dave Keary's guitar becomes more prominent while Morrison is pulling out all the stops vocally.

The most lowdown track is Lightnin' Hopkins' "Automobile Blues," with Morrison on electric guitar backed by piano, bass and drums, with excellent

harp from Ned Edwards. Then it's back to gospel on Mose Allison's "Benediction," followed by two more blues songs, Little Walter's "Mean Old World," with Van handling the harp chores and Bo Diddley's "Ride On Josephine," which closes the album. Throughout the disc, Morrison stays true to the material, never overdoes it, but what really makes the album is that he is clearly having a good time.

Last spring Sony Legacy in conjunction with Morrison's company Exile, released the three-disc *Authorized Bang Sessions*, Morrison's first recordings as a solo artist. It is not that far a stretch from the guy singing "Ride On Josephine" to the music on this album. There have been various compilations of Morrison's Bang sessions before, but this is easily the most comprehensive and detailed. One of the things that makes this version more interesting is Morrison wrote the liner notes. Producer and songwriter Bert Berns was the man behind Bang Records, and he surrounded Morrison with some of the greatest New York session players, including guitarists Eric Gale, Hugh McCracken, and Al Gorgoni, keyboardists, Artie Butler and Paul Griffin, bassists, Russ Savakus and Bob Bushnell, and Herb Lovelle and Gary Chester on drums. The sessions yielded Morrison's first big solo hit, "Brown Eyed Girl," with Gale playing the famous bass part and McCracken the equally famous guitar riff. That said Morrison's innumerable problems with Bang Records began when Berns followed up the single with an album, *Blowin' Your Mind*, consisting of tracks Morrison thought were demos. That said, the album contained two tracks Morrison fans would cherish for their intensity, "He Ain't Give You None," (later covered by soul singer Freddie Scott, also a Bang artist) and the startling "T.B. Sheets." Once Morrison became successful with Warner Brothers Records, Bang put out *The Best of Van Morrison* which was really *Blowin' Your Mind* with additional tracks, most notably "Joe Harper Saturday Morning," which has the raunchiest guitar ever to appear on a Morrison record. Bang was a company without shame, and they used the photo from the back of *Astral Weeks* as the cover pic. Many years later *The Bang Sessions* was released and what made it a must-buy was early versions of two songs from *Astral Weeks*, "Madame George" and "Beside You." All those songs and more are on the new set, and several songs are represented by both the original stereo and mono mixes. There are several takes and mixes of "Brown Eyed Girl."

The songs that really make this worth checking out is the additional take of "Joe Harper Saturday Morning," and two outstanding versions of "Beside You," Take 2 and Take 5.

The third disc, "The Contractual Obligation Session" is for extreme Morrison fans only. Bert Berns was in deep with the mob, and had no problem using mob guys to get his artists to live up to their contracts. Morrison was in negotiations with Warners, but owed Bang a record, so he went to the studio alone with his guitar and recorded 30 songs he made up on the spot, none of them two-minutes long, with titles such as "Blowin' Your Nose," and "Nose In Your Blow," and "Hang On Groovy," in one big fuck you to Bang Records. It's at times funny, but it's a one-time listen.

I was never a big Allman Brothers or Greg Allman fan though certain songs along the way would grab me. When I saw he covered Dylan's "Going Going Gone," on his final album, *Southern Blood* (Rounder), I decided to check it out on NPR's "First Listen" site. What I heard was some of the best music I'd heard all year, and kept going back to hear it again.

Recorded at Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and produced by Don Was in one of his best production jobs, the album starts with the one original song, "My Only True Friend" and then several covers including songs by Tim Buckley, the Grateful Dead and Jackson Browne among others. The opening track is about the road (and touring), and Allman returns to that theme throughout, including Lowell George's classic, "Willin'."

What makes the album special is Allman's impassioned singing and the brilliant and tasteful arrangements and playing. Allman knew his time was short and he gives it everything he has and the musicians, his road band, helped out by pedal steel ace Greg Leisz, and various background vocalists including Jackson Browne, Buddy Miller and the McCrary Sisters.

There is one straight blues on the album, Willie Dixon's "I Love The Life I Live," that Allman sings the shit out of, and a more than decent version of "Out Of Left Field," written by Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham. But as good as Allman's version is, Percy Sledge's recording of the song is one of the great soul records of all time and just about impossible to beat.

Standing out is Dylan's "Going Going Gone." On the original *Planet Waves* version, Dylan sang it as a spooky ballad, dominated by Robbie Robertson's trademark pinched guitar leads. Allman gives it a full-blooded Muscle Shoals soul ballad treatment with perfect horns, with slide guitar and Leisz' celestial pedal steel riding throughout. The way the guitars answer the horns is pure perfection. Allman sings it like a haunted man, giving the song new life and new meaning in the context of his situation and the mood of the album. I'm not someone who's big on Dylan covers, but Allman's version

of this song makes me wish he'd done an album of Dylan tunes with Memphis Soul arrangements.

Also up there is the Dead's "Black Muddy River," which is given a majestic arrangement with Allman bringing out the poetry of Robert Hunter's lyrics.

Jackson Browne's "Song For Adam" closes the album in an arrangement that sticks close to Browne's original version. Allman sings it as if he wrote it, and on the last verse when he sings the line, "It seems he stopped his singing in the middle of his song," he is unable to go on and sing the last two lines of the verse. Wisely, they didn't redo it and left it that way, with the lead guitar gently filling out the verse, a fitting and sad conclusion to an album that's about saying farewell.

A few years ago, I was watching a friend's band play in a local pub, when the owner came to the table handing out free passes to a Waterboys show. I hadn't paid attention to the Waterboys in years, but the show turned out to be a revelation, with songs I had to hear again, especially one, a Dylan-styled blues romp, titled "Still A Freak," that was on their next album, *Modern Blues*. They just released a new two-disc set, *Out Of All This Blue* (BMG) that's also available in a limited three-disc version that contains alternate takes, live versions and outtakes for about six bucks more.

The Waterboys on this album are pretty much Mike Scott and whoever he has with him, and a pretty good case could be made that this is really a solo album. Many of the tracks list Scott as playing "instruments," and often many of those instruments are synthesized. The music is a diverse array of styles delving into hip-hop and classical and constantly mixing it up, often on the same song. Those who are expecting Scott's mix of Celtic fused with Americana roots rock may be surprised at the synthesizers and choir-like choruses mixed with string sections, but Scott rarely strays too far from his original musical leanings.

Lyrically, many of the songs are about being deeply in love, but there are also celebrations of New York, Nashville and Memphis with numerous references to London and Japan. Throughout there are touches of humor, often where you don't expect it, as well as intriguing combination of storytelling mixed with poetic lines. Scott has a way of writing that lets you know it's from real life experiences.

One of the more interesting songs is "Kinky's History Lesson," where he rips into Friedman for referring to the British as "Neville Chamberlain surrender monkeys." Scott goes through the entire history of the British in World War II. Searching for the source of the quote, I discovered Scott had

written a [blog](#) about it 2008, where he also makes it clear he likes Friedman.

While at times it seems as if Scott may be using too many ideas at once, the majority of the songs are irresistibly catchy. Ultimately, *Out Of All This Blue* is alive, adventurous and inspired.